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SUBJECT: AK PARTY'S WESTERN BLACK SEA REGION ELECTION

OPPONENTS HOLDING THEIR OWN AND CRYING FOUL

(U) Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (C) Summary: Candidates running against ruling AK Party (AKP) in the western Black Sea region appear to be holding their own as they approach March 28 local election. At the same time they accuse AKP of using "bribes and blackmail" to influence voters. They assert AKP's national success is due primarily to corruption and weak leadership among the other parties, and predict that wary voters will begin to look for alternatives in the aftermath of the elections. AKP officials say the party's national influence enables it to better serve cities and municipalities. As elsewhere in Turkey, women are not playing a major role in the AKP campaigns in the region. End Summary.

2. (U) Emboffs traveled March 22-23 to the western Black Sea cities of Eregli, Zonguldak, and Mengen to discuss the March 28 local elections with candidates, party officials, and local residents.

Opponents Accuse AK of "Bribes and Blackmail"

3. (C) All of our contacts, including AKP members, told us voters in the region traditionally favor "social democratic" parties, which in Turkey means left-of-center parties such as CHP (Republican People's Party) and DSP (Democratic Left Party), although voters have also put parties on the right in power. However, they said, corruption and inept leadership have driven voters away from those parties, and AKP's status as the party in power holds attraction for some. Mayors in Eregli (Motherland Party - ANAP), Zonguldak (CHP) and Mengen (Nationalist Movement Party - MHP) all asserted AKP is taking advantage of its position as the ruling party in Ankara to use "bribes and blackmail" to influence voters. Eregli Mayor Halil Posbiyik, who has won substantial popularity owing to his common touch and ability to win the EU's "European City" designation owing to his urban planning reforms, said AKP has been promising Eregli residents money and academic scholarships if they elect the AKP mayoral candidate. In addition, party members claim an AKP mayor would feed the poor 12 months a year, rather than just for the month of Ramazan, as the city does now. "Lies, lies, lies," Posbiyik said. "One day (PM) Erdogan will suffer for all these lies."

4. (C) AKP officials in Eregli, while claiming that their mayoral and municipal assembly candidates are "honest," made it clear they consider AKP's national influence their main selling point. AKP Eregli Subprovincial Chairman Mustafa Demirel summed up the party's campaign theme with one word: "service." Asked to elaborate, he said that AKP candidates in Eregli are telling voters the GOT will postpone the planned privatization of the Erdemir steel plant, Eregli's main employer. Demirel implied to us that the postponement might be indefinite, and said AKP is selling voters on the idea that Eregli would benefit from having the national government, municipality, and Erdemir plant under the same party. This theme is underscored by an AKP campaign banner reading, "Government and Municipality, Hand in Hand." AKP is betting that people will vote for their candidates for fear that privatizing the high-paying plant will mean layoffs, Demirel said.

5. (C) Posbiyik accused AKP of distributing food and clothing to voters, and paying the unemployed to participate in party rallies. He added that AKP has pressured the Erdemir management to call on employees to vote for AKP. Claiming the workers aren't fooled, he said many have secretly donated to his campaign. In a separate meeting, Erdemir's chief fireman confirmed to us that the workers oppose privatization

but support Posbiyik's reelection.

16. (C) CHP officials in Zonguldak also said AKP is bribing the poor with coal, clothing, and food (note: earlier in the year we heard in the Aegean province of Manisa that AKP arranged deliveries of coal to poor families there as well. End note). Zonguldak Mayor Ismail Esref and Mengen Mayor Ali Budak told us AKP is trying to "blackmail" voters by threatening that the national government will cut off support for local services unless they vote AKP. Budak introduced us to two former AKP members he recruited as municipal assembly candidates. They both told us they objected to the "aggressive" tactics AKP is using in the campaign.

17. (C) Nevertheless, Posbiyik, Esref, and Budak all told us they are confident their reputations and records in office will assure them victory on election day. AKP officials in Zonguldak predicted victory in the mayoral race, but those in Eregli and Mengen focused on the municipal assembly races and avoided commenting directly on their chances of defeating the incumbent mayors.

After Election - New Political Landscape?

18. (C) Several of our non-AKP contacts predicted that a viable alternative to AKP, or at least the beginning of one, will emerge from the fallout of the elections. Posbiyik averred that the elections could spell the end of some of the smaller parties, such as ANAP, and voters wary of AKP could begin to rally behind new opposition leaders. He opined that Turks are "lending" their votes to AKP until a better alternative arises. But Eregli residents, like some others across Turkey, worry that AKP is hiding an Islamist agenda beneath a pro-EU cover. "Erbakan (former PM from the Islamist Refah Party) swam six meters under the surface, but AK swims 25 meters under," Posbiyik said. "You can't see what they're doing." CHP Zonguldak Provincial Chairman Ali Kocal averred that if AKP's support increases it will be trouble for Turkey. Success will make the ruling party arrogant, and its emboldened leaders will begin to pursue an Islamist agenda that will pose a threat to secularism and stir conflict, he asserted. To avoid that, he predicted, voters will begin to turn more toward CHP and other opposition parties.

AK Women Take Back Seat in Region

19. (U) As in the rest of Turkey, women occupy a minor place on AKP candidate lists in the region. In Eregli, out of a total of 25 candidates, AK is running three women for municipal council, none for mayor. In Zonguldak, two of 31 AK municipal assembly candidates are women; none of the AKP mayoral candidates is a woman. In Mengen, AKP has no women among its 12 candidates. For CHP, by contrast, six of 25 Eregli candidates and six of 31 Zonguldak candidates are women. In keeping with AKP's stated policy, none of the party's women candidates in Eregli wear headscarves, but all members of the party's local Women's Auxiliary do.

110. (C) While we scheduled separate meetings with AKP leaders and Auxiliary members, two male party members joined our Auxiliary meeting, often interrupting and dominating the conversation. Kamile Saatci, Women's Auxiliary president, claimed there are no problems concerning equality for women in Eregli, due to the town's relative affluence. When we asked whether there is a need for more women to become engaged in politics, she said "it would be good" to have more women candidates. The Auxiliary's sole mission is to raise the women's vote for AK. Saatci described for us how Auxiliary members go door-to-door, having tea with women in their homes. She said the group does not discuss women's issues, encourage women to run for office, or develop a women's platform for candidates. In Mengen, we asked AKP Subprovincial Chairman Sadik Erdogan why AKP is running no women candidates. He claimed that prospective women candidates had asked to be given "priority," but the party refused, giving priority instead to people with professional backgrounds, such as engineers and architects.

Comment

111. (C) The accusations against AKP come as no surprise,

given AKP's position as the sole ruling party. In these local elections, we expect a number of non-AKP incumbents to retain their seats based on individual popularity. Nevertheless, opposition parties will not succeed in slowing AK's momentum by relying solely on trying to fan public fears that AKP's true intentions are malign.

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